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Written statement* submitted by the International Humanist and Ethical Union, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[16 February 2015]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Freedom of Assembly, Association and Expression in Mauritania: The Plight of Anti-Slavery Activists

The International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) is deeply concerned about reports it has received from anti-slavery human rights activists in Mauritania regarding their detention and ill-treatment at the hands of the authorities in the country.

On the 7th November 2014, a number of activists from the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA-Mauritania) formed an anti-slavery convoy that visited rural villages in order to raise awareness about land rights for people of slave descent (land slavery) and inform those susceptible to exploitation of their rights[1]. On the 11th November, those involved were attacked by riot police, arrested, and imprisoned for their participation in the convoy; it was reported that the police used tear gas and stun grenades against them[2]. IRA-Mauritania's headquarters were closed down and the activists were held in different detention centres in the southern city of Rosso, without access to their phones or visits from their families.

Amongst those arrested were Biram Ould Dah Ould Abeid (President of IRA-Mauritania and runner-up in the 2014 Presidential election)[3], Djiby Sow (President of the NGO Kawtal) and Brahim Bilal Ramdhane (Vice President of the IRA). Abeid maintains that he was not in fact part of the convoy[4]. In January 2015, the three men were sentenced to two years' imprisonment for inciting violence, disturbing public order, offending members of the authorities and being members of an unregistered organization[5]. Seven other activists were acquitted. Those protesting the judgements outside the court at the time were dispersed using tear gas and batons[6]

An estimated 21 anti-slavery campaigners have been arrested following the protests and solidarity rallies elsewhere in Mauritania. This number includes Sabber Hussein, Brahim Jiddou, Baba Traoré and Yacoub Inalla, who were arrested in a Nouakchott mosque for defending the actions of IRA-Mauritania. Amongst their charges were the offences of disturbing prayers and incitement to revolt[7]. IRA-Mauritania members, Chedad Mohamed, Mohamed Vadoua and Mr Yacoub Mussa were also arrested. Currently, six IRA-Mauritania members remain in prison, awaiting trial. The Office of the High Commission for Human Rights (OHCHR) has reported that, "the conditions of detention in the places that were visited do not comply with the minimum international standards, most particularly the detention units and their ventilation"[8].

Context: Slavery in Mauritania

This recent episode is just the latest in a history of harassment, intimidation and repression by the Mauritanian authorities against those who campaign against slavery[9]. The anti-slavery activists have sought to highlight the issue of land rights for people of slave descent and rid Mauritania of its remaining slavery.

Despite a 1981 law banning slavery in Mauritania, the establishment of an antislavery agency in 2013, and the government and religious leaders denying the existence of slavery in the country, it is estimated that between 155,000[10]

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[1] https://freedomhouse.org/article/imprisoned-activist-speaks-about-slavery-mauritania#.VN3eruasXHR

[22] http://iheu.org/anti-slavery-campaigner-and-iheu-partner-faces-political-charges-in-mauritania/

[3] In December, Abeid published a letter from prison. The text of his letter can be seen here: http://ira-usa.org/letter-from-jail-biram-demands-a-trial/

[4] http://fr.alakhbar.info/9619-0-Mauritanie-IRA-exige-pacifiquement-mais-avec-fermete-la-liberation-de-Biram.html

[5] Telephone conference, January 2015. See also http://www.lavoixdelamerique.com/content/biram-ould-abeid-parle-depuis-sa-cellule-a-voa-afrique/2519082.html and http://unpo.org/article/17712

[6] http://www.amnesty.org/en/for-media/press-releases/mauritania-jailed-presidential-candidate-and-anti-slavery-activists-must-be

[7] http://unpo.org/article/17712

[8] http://unpo.org/downloads/1156.pdf

[9] http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/mauritania-must-end-clamp-down-anti-slavery-activists-2014-11-12

and half a million[11] Mauritanians are believed to live in conditions of servitude. According to the Global Slavery Index, Mauritania has the highest prevalence of slavery in the world. Whilst, in 2007 Mauritania passed a law setting penalties of five to 10 years in prison for all forms of slavery[12], the law is hindered by its requirement that it needs to be the slaves themselves who file a legal complaint before any prosecution can occur.

A recent report by the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation (UNPO) on slavery in Mauritania highlighted the "long-standing and embedded nature of slavery in Mauritian society", grave defects in the government's Roadmap to Combat the Consequences of Slavery, and observed that "the many criticisms of slavery and slavery-like practices in Mauritania by U.N. human rights treaty bodies and other international organizations" all, to a great extent, go unheeded[13].

IRA-Mauritania has reported that often, arrested slave masters are released without charges and that money is sometimes used so that a plaintiff will drop their complaint. Human rights groups have argued that in the frequent property disputes that occur between slaves/former slaves and their masters, local authorities will favour the masters[14]. Despite the documented cases of slavery in the country, in December, Mauritania's President accused IRA-Mauritania of being an illegal group seeking to "upset stability and obtain material and moral gains"[15].

The arrest and imprisonment of Mr Abeid, leader of IRA-Mauritania, should be seen within the context of his political career. He ran in the 2014 presidential election - coming second - and had accused the government of fraud[16]. The government has been described as being fearful of the popularity of IRA-Mauritania's message[17]. It is also worth noting that since the arrests of IRA-Mauritania activists, malicious and entirely false conspiracy theories linking the group to Israel have become a feature of Mauritanian commentary[18]. Representatives of Nouakchott's largest Mosque called for the killing of Mr. Abeid for his allegedly insulting Islam in October 2014[19].

International Response

There has been international criticism of Mauritania's most recent crackdown against the anti-slavery activists in the country. The UNPO[20], the US Department of State[21], dozens of UK Parliamentarians[22], and members of the European Union[23] have all spoken out in support of the right to peaceful protest against slavery and for the release of Mr. Abeid and his colleagues. Following its most recent mission to Mauritania, the OHCHR also raised its concerns regarding the events of 11th November and the consequent detentions[24].

Internationally, the human rights work of IRA-Mauritania has been recognised; in 2013, Abeid was awarded the United Nations Human Rights Prize as well as the Front Line Award for Human Rights Defenders at Risk[25].

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[10] http://www.globalslaveryindex.org/country/mauritania/
[11] https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/mauritania#.VN4yOOasXHR
[12] http://unpo.org/downloads/1208.pdf, p24
[13] http://unpo.org/downloads/1208.pdf, p.vi
[14] https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/mauritania#.VN4yOOasXHR
[15] http://www.bbc.co.uk/monitoring/antislavery-group-in-mauritania-backlash
[16] http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/crisiswatch/crisiswatch-database.aspx?CountryIDs=%7B81ACFC60-BD88-4B79-886C-33FE2C8969F5%7D
[17] http://www.menas.co.uk/sahara_focus/news/article/3708/repression-endangers-mauritania%27s-national-security/ and https://freedomhouse.org/article/mauritania-anti-slavery-activists-arrested#.VN8j_uasXHQ
[18] http://www.bbc.co.uk/monitoring/antislavery-group-in-mauritania-backlash
[19] http://www.dw.de/biram-dah-abeid-mit-wut-und-mut-gegen-sklaverei-in-mauretanien/a-18062533
[20] http://unpo.org/article/17712
[21] http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/01/236079.htm
[22] http://www.parliament.uk/edm/2014-15/634
[23] http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=MOTION&reference=B8-2014-0383&language=EN, http://www.unpo.org/article/16500, and http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+WQ+P-2014-010225+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN
[24] http://unpo.org/downloads/1156.pdf
[25] http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/node/22572

Summary and Recommendations

As determined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, everyone has the right to peaceful assembly, freedom of association with others, and freedom of expression[26]. The treatment of anti-slavery campaigners in Mauritania represents a clear violation of these rights.

What is particularly disturbing is not only the complete lack of regard for the basic rights to assembly, association and expression, but that the anti-slavery activists were seeking to exercise these rights in order to highlight and improve the plight of enslaved people in Mauritania – people denied their right to autonomy, full freedom and land rights.

Arbitrary detentions of anti-slavery campaigners blatantly contradict what Mauritania has claimed within the Human Rights Council; in 2013, the Mauritania representative, Mr Ould Khattra, specifically noted that, *in the context of freedom from slavery, freedom of opinion and political expression is guaranteed in Mauritania*[27]. Clearly however, there is a stark contrast between Mauritania's rhetoric at the Council and the reality on the ground in the country. Whilst the IHEU welcomes the Mauritanian government's recent legislative reforms and awareness-raising initiatives, its concurrent abuse of the rights of those defending the enslaved, ensures Mauritania continues with its ignominious place at top of the list of countries with the highest prevalence of slavery in the world[28].

The work of anti-slavery activists in Mauritania and the crucial role they play in holding the government to account in terms of its human rights obligations and commitments must be respected fully by the Mauritanian government[29].

Accordingly,

- We call on the Council to put pressure on Mauritania to release, with immediate and unconditional effect, all those imprisoned because of their peaceful protest against slavery. We also urge an end to their continuous harassment and intimidation.

- The international community needs to work with the Mauritanian Government and NGOs in order to mainstream anti-slavery initiatives, and provide funding and technical expertise to help combat slavery and its "vestiges".

- We support the recommendations for the Mauritanian government as set out by the OHCHR following its latest mission[30]. These include: Launching an official, independent and impartial investigation into the actions of the Mauritanian police during the events of the 11th November and the subsequent related events; releasing any individual detained only on the grounds that they peacefully expressed their opinion; in conformity with international standards and the articles of the penal procedure, ensuring that all registers, in all places of detention, are completed with particular attention to the physical and sanitary state of health of the detainees; guaranteeing medical care for all detainees in Mauritania, including those mentioned in this statement.

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[26] UDHR, §19 & §20 and ICCPR, §19, §20 & §21

[27] 8 CT13/035E: Report of Mauritania. See
http://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B9C2E/(httpNewsByYear_en)/8EA20A793C8F9B90C1257C0C0
0417FE2?OpenDocument

[28] http://www.globalslaveryindex.org/findings/

[29] http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/mauritania-must-end-clamp-down-anti-slavery-activists-2014-11-12

[30] http://unpo.org/downloads/1156.pdf and
http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/MR/FinalReportMission12Dec2014.doc